

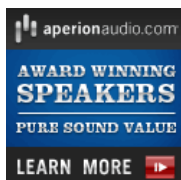
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DVD & Blu-ray Video Reviews
Gonzalo Rubalcaba, piano - Solos - The Jazz Sessions (2010)

What better way to start the series than with the artist many critics have acclaimed as one of the top jazz pianists active today - Cuban emigre Gonzalo Rubalcaba?

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Gonzalo Rubalcaba, piano - Solos - The Jazz Sessions (2010)


Program: Prologo to El Manicero, Supernova, Improvisation #1, Con Alma, Besame Mucho, Yolanda Anastasia
Director: Daniel K. Berman
Studio: Original Spin Media/MVD Visual 16 [3/23/10]
Video: 16:9 color
Audio: English PCM stereo
No region code
Length: 50 minutes
Rating: *****

This is the first DVD release of a series of 39 HDTV music performance and profile series on mostly jazz figures which was originally produced for and shown on the Canadian Bravo channel. (Figures; who in the U.S. has been doing anything with jazz on TV since the 1950s?) Each episode has complete solo selections, short interviews and sometimes behind-the-scenes footage, and they are shot with multiple moving cameras, elegant sets and lighting, in hi-def format with excellent PCM stereo sound. There is no program host or audience present - these are designed for the serious viewer at home. Among the fine artists in the series will be Lee Konitz, Greg Osby, John Abercrombie, Andrew Hill, Bill Frisell, and many more. Being unaccompanied puts the spotlight on the particular performer's unique talents and gives the viewer a front row seat at an intimate musical experience.

What better way to start the series than with the artist many critics have acclaimed as one of the top jazz pianists active today - Cuban emigre Gonzalo Rubalcaba? Coming from a musical family in Havana, he began studying classical piano at age eight and now blends both Cuban and American jazz into a fresh and sensitive new style. Here and there in the first number Gonzalo briefly tells us a bit about his background and upbringing in music. Then he continues the program bent over his Yamaha concert grand, with plenty of close up shots of his fingers at the keyboard. The first three selections show off his amazing virtuosity and roaring rhythmic pulse. He sounds quite different from any other modern jazz pianist you might have heard.

For the last three tunes, he switches to a quieter, more lyrical style and slower tempi. Carefully selecting the often sparse chords and melodic lines, he creates tender miniatures that on occasion remind one of the characteristic piano pieces of Robert Schumann. He takes his time in his exploration of the harmonic possibilities in each tune - not hitting the listener over the head with the obvious. One has to listen into the music to pick up on its subtleties. Even numbers that normally call for an uptempo treatment with all hands on deck - such as *Besame Mucho* - become quiet introspective explorations of melody and



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harmonies. This solo session is quite different from some of Rubalcaba's CDs. I don't believe I've ever heard such a devotional, glorifying treatment of Dizzy's lovely *Con Alma*. (It is omitted from the list of selections.) It truly does have soul to burn, but the fire is on low. I'm looking forward to more of this fine series.

- John Henry

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